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AUTHOR Allen, H. M., Jr.; Sears, David O.
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ABSTRACT

The conventional explanation for adult white opposition to busing for school desegregation emphasizes a rational, objective self interested component. Whites are seen as opposing busing because its costs far exceed its benefits. However, little of the social psychological literature supports this view. Studies by and large support the findings that rather than rational gain-loss calculations, symbolic racism and political conservatism are the main determinants of busing opposition. The literature has not adequately examined busing sentiment in a local setting on the eve of actual implementation. In a study of a sample of white adult residents randomly selected from the Los Angeles County area during December 1976, approximately 20 months prior to actual implementation of the Los Angeles desegregation plan, it was found that symbolic racism and political conservatism related substantially to busing opposition. However, a comparatively moderate, but nonetheless significant self interest effect, indexed by whether or not the respondent had children who might be concretely affected by the implementation of busing, also emerged. The implications of these findings suggest that further research is needed to isolate socialization attitudes from self-interest variables in understanding busing opposition. (Author/WI)

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WHITE OPPOSITION TO BUSING IN LOS ANGELES: IS SELF INTEREST REJUVENATED?

by

H. M. Allen Jr.

David O. Sears

University of California,

Los Angeles

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ABSTRACT

The conventional explanation for adult white opposition to busing for school desegregation emphasizes a rational, objective self interested component. Quite simply, whites are seen as opposing the method because its costs far exceed its benefits. To date, however, this explanation has received very little support in the social psychological literature. Rather than rational gain-loss calculations, the evidence by and large documents the power of two symbolic political attitudes, symbolic racism and political conservatism, which are acquired during socialization, as determinants of busing opposition. The literature, however, has not adequately examined busing sentiment in a local setting on the eve of actual implementation in which the special anxieties attending self interest could promote increased antagonism. In an effort to explore this possibility, this study assessed the relative predictive power of the utilitarian or self interest model versus the socialization model on a sample of white adult residents randomly selected from the L.A. County area during December, 1976, approximately twenty months prior to actual implementation of the L. A. desegregation plan. Consistent with the trends in the literature, sysbolic racism and political conservatism related quite substantially to busing opposition. However, a comparatively moderate, but nonetheless significant, self interest effect, indexed by whether or not the respondent had children who might be concretely affected by the implementation of busing, also emerged. The implications of these findings, not only for a revised view of white opposition, but also for the utilitarian versus socialization debate, are discussed.

The intense antagonism of white Los Angelenoes toward the use of busing to achieve court-ordered school desegregation poses an enigma to students of public opinion. In particular, we note that even under the extremely adverse conditions generated during Judge Egly's rejection of the L.A. School Board's first desegregation proposal, a survey executed by Armor found that a plurality of L. A. Metropolitan anglos continued to favor the goal of school integration. Moreover, in the months just preceeding the controversial judicial review, when one can reasonably assume that white attitudes toward integration better approximated their norm, 80 to 85% were reported favorable.[1] Yet, despite this relatively durable undercurrent of white acceptance, an overwhelming 75 to 85% continue to demonstrate adamant opposition to the most immediate and perhaps most effective means for achieving that goal.

This ironic juxtaposition of white sentiment concerning the use of busing and the goals of school desegregation has been subjected to numerous attempts at explanation. Perhaps the most popular of these emphasizes the many costs, relative to the few benefits, that will be sustained by the anglo population. Thus, for example, we have the arguments that (1) white children will have to be bused for unnecessarily long periods and (2) white adults will have to contend with the rising crime rates in their own neighborhood while (3) it has yet to be proven that the achievement levels of minority children actually increases through desegregated contact with white majority children.

Social psychologists, most notably Katz (1960), have incorporated this cost-benefit model in what is called the "functionalist" approach to the formation and perpetuation of attitudes. Quite simply, functionalists believe that attitudes are created and maintained by the goals that they are intended to serve. In the case of cost-benefit considerations, attitudes are adopted out of a utilitarian motive. That is, because the individual's intent is to maximize his gains and minimize his losses, he will tend to adopt those predispositions that are most instrumental

to achieving these ends. In short, the individual's self interest governs the orientation he takes toward a particular stimulus object. Thus, in essence, the overwhelming opposition of whites toward busing is viewed as the product of a deliberate rational process which, with individual self interest at the helm, has balanced the pros and cons and opted against the method because of the multitude of inconveniences involved.

However, other analysts have not been content with the self interest explanation. Among other things, they observe that the number of those who indicate that they are opposed continually far exceeds those with a direct stake involved, however defined, e.g. having a child in public school, living in an all-white neighborhood where busing is occurring, etc. Moreover, they note that parents of children in public schools are no more likely that non-parents to be opposed to busing.

In particular, socialization theorists have been the most diligent in pursuing these objections (Sears, Hensler, and Speer,1977; McConahay and Hawley, 1977. As an alternative model, they posit that the individual acquires stable, affectively based predispositions toward key stimulus objects by the time he has reached adolescence. In the case of busing, racial prejudice and political conservatism are emphasized. Typically the product of familial and early educational influences with together constitute a relatively homogenous and constant environment, these predispositions maintain a high degree of resilience throughout the individual's life time. In addition, the affective nature of these predispositions causes them to generalize toward related stimulus objects. As a result, the symbolic aspects of related stimuli tend to evoke the generalized predispositions even during adulthood. Of major interest is the prediction that these socialization residues, when evoked, will overpower the effects of more functional self interest factors as determinants of the individual's response. Hence, from the point of view of socialization theorists, opposition to busing stems not from rational deliberation of self interested factors. Rather, it is largely the

product of a socialization process which engenders a heavily affected, non-rational, response to a stimulus laden with symbolic similarities to an earlier response object.

Briefly looking at some of the relevant research on these competing explanations, we find that studies done on national data almost uniformly report the absence of a self interest effect. Thus, for example, Weidman's analysis of 1972 and 1974 NORC data reports that when level of education, sex, and amount of racism are controlled, whether or not the respondent had school age children exerted no significant difference on his opposition to busing. Similarly, Kelley's analysis of the 1972 NORC sample reports that non-parents were virtually as likely as parents to oppose busing. Moreover, Sears, Hensler, and Speer's examination of 1972 CPS National Election Study data found not only an absence of a child effect, but also that living in an all-white neighborhood or one with all white schools in which busing was threatening or had occurred, exerted no significant impact on busing opposition. Note that this held even among liberals, the highly educated, and the racially tolerant when they were treated separately. Likewise, in an on-going analysis, Sears, Tyler, Lau, and Allen's examination of the 1976 CPS National Election Study has found that whether or not the respondent had a child, and if so, whether or not the child was taking a bus to school, had no significant impact. And again, living in an all-white neighborhood whose grade schools were either threatened by busing, or were experiencing it, yielded no significant results.

At the local level, McConahay and Hawley report that white parents in Louisville were no more likely to be opposed to busing than non-parents. In addition, neighborhood and grade school composition were not significant predictors. Indeed, the only researchers to suggest a child effect are Nicolleti and his colleagues in their Denver study where mandatory busing had been implemented prior to the survey. However, the X^2 tests they utilized failed to control for sex, age, and race, and hence, lend questionable results at best.

In contrast, the evidence supporting the socialization model is more substantive in both national and local level data. Thus, Sears and his colleagues found that generalized racial intolerance and political conservatism were highly significant predictors ($p < .001$) toward busing opposition in a multiple regression equation in which the standardized betas for the self interest items did not even approach significance. A similar pattern of results are reported by McConahay and Hawley in their Lousiville data. Moreover, both Weidman in his NORC analysis and Rubin's study of Richmond County, California residents have underlined the strong association between racial prejudice and opposition to busing.

Indeed, the only study to question the relationship between racism and busing sentiment is Kelley's NORC analysis. However, Kelley's strategy was to compare the correlations of "the subjectively distinct" racial prejudice and busing opposition across several background and status variables and across a number of social issues. Kelley's use of the resultant low relationships to buttress his arguments failed to take into account the fact that the opposition and prejudice items were markedly skewed in opposite directions thereby limiting the extent to which the relationships could be similar. These artificial constraints call Kelley's conclusions into question.

The focus of the present study was again to contrast the self interest and socialization arguments as determinants of busing sentiment. In other words, our basic strategy was to pit the relative predictive power of impersonal, abstract socialization residues versus more personal concrete, issue-related as predictors of busing sentiment. The data for our analysis was obtained from a local survey of 899 white adult residents randomly selected from the L.A. county area during the month

of December, 1976. The survey instrument was a 77-item questionnaire designed primarily to probe those variables we felt pertinent to the formation of busing opinions.

In our analysis a number of independent variables were operationalized. Our purest and most reliable of the self interest dimension was a five-point variable that indicated whether or not the respondent had school age children in L.A. public schools. With regard to the composite's marginals, 62% had no children that could be affected, 4% had school age children (6-18) who did not attend public school in Southern California but not in Los Angeles, 6% had preschool age children while 16% had school age children attanding L.A. public schools. In addition, two measures reflecting more subjective self interest were the respondent's preceptions about the likelihood of busing. One queried whether or not the respondent felt that the busing of his child or children in his neighborhood was likely, with 56% saying strongly likely or likely and 47% indicating unlikely or strongly unlikely. The other measure measured the extent to which the respondent thought the busing of minority children into his neighborhood was likely, with 56% saying strongly likely or likely and 33% saying unlikely or strongly unlikely.

With regard to the socialization residue dimension, two factors, generalized racial intolerance and political conservatism, were operationalized. The generalized racial intolerance variable was a standardized, highly reliable scale constructed from five attitudinal items, all of which loaded highly on the same factor in a varimax rotated factor analysis. Two three point variables assessed the respondent's

opinions about the government's special treatment of blacks and the pace with which civil rights advocates are moving. The other variables indexed the extent to which the respondent agreed with the statements "blacks shouldn't push themselves where they are not wanted", "over the years blacks are getting more than they deserve", and "whites don't have the right to keep blacks out of their neighborhood". The "black deserve" item which correlated most highly with the scale had the following frequencies: 37% strongly agree or agree, and 47% disagree of strongly disagree.

The political conservatism variable was a single item which indexed the respondent's self-designated position on the liberal-conservative continuum. In addition, the respondent's age and education were included in the equation.

Our dependent variable was another standardized, highly reliable scale composed of five items, all of which loaded nicely on a second factor in our factor analysis. One item reflected the respondent's attitude toward the use of busing in general to achieve integration while another indexed how the respondent would respond to the implementation of a local plan. The other three variables were Likert scale items reflecting the respondent's agreement with the statements "busing will improve education", "busing will not increase violence", and "integration justifies busing". The item correlating most highly with the scale, which concerned beliefs about the extent to which integration justifies busing, had the following marginals: 13% strongly agree or agree and 79% disagree or strongly disagree.

The crux of our analyses were a series of multiple regression equations which yield a picture of the relative power of these independent variables

in predicting toward opposition to busing. The results, as shown in Table 1, were quite dramatic. In our full regression model the racial intolerance scale was by far the most potent predictor item with a standardized beta equaling .39, twice that of any other variable. The political conservatism item was likewise quite significant. In contrast, among the self interest items, only the composite variable about children in public schools was a significant predictor and a moderate one at that. The two likelihood items washed out almost completely. In terms of the amount of variance accounted for, the symbolic racism item was roughly five times as important as the self interest composite item. In addition, the age and education variables were quite non-significant. Note also that the total percentage of variance accounted for by the full model predictors was a healthy .23, a result which, in view of the R^2 associated with most contemporary survey analyses, readily attest to the predictive power of our overall model.

Other analyses did not substantially alter this constellation of results. For example, when the perceived likelihood, as well as the perceived unlikelihood, of future in-busing of minorities and future out-busing of majorities was controlled, racial prejudice continued to contribute nearly twice as much toward the regression equation as the self interest composite item. Moreover, the strength of association between racial prejudice and political conservatism vis a vis opposition to busing yielded gamma statistics of .51 and .37 respectively. Indeed, Table 2 depicts just how pervasive opposition was in crossing ideological lines. When racial intolerance and political conservatism were divided into thirds and cross-tabulated, controlling for those extremely

opposed to busing, more than 50% in each category were extremely opposed to busing, except for the liberal-low racial intolerance category. Note that the comparable gamma statistic for self interest and the busing dependent variable was only .18.

With regard to the demographics, on the other hand, further analyses corroborated previous work in the socialization literature which links old age and little education with the two symbolic attitudinal variables. That is, the older and less educated our respondent, the more likely he was to be racially prejudiced, politically conservative, and opposed to busing. Said another way, the variance associated with the main effects of age and education in our multiple regression equation was absorbed by the two statistically independent socialization residue items.

Thus, we found that the socialization residues, generalized racial intolerance and political conservatism, among antecedents are old age and little education, were substantially more influential in determining busing attitudes than the self interest variables. However, it should be stressed that the emergence of the self interest composite item as a significant predictor to busing opposition, should not be summarily dismissed. Indeed, even when the future in-busing of minority children and the future out-busing of white children were seen as unlikely, this self interest main effect obtained. Thus, of the various analyses specifically pitting the symbolic politics model versus the self interest model in predicting to busing opposition (Sears et al, 1977; McConahay et al, 1976), ours is the first analysis in which self interest in any form demonstrated a significant effect.

In light of these other studies, we attribute this emergence to the unique characteristics of our data collection period in Los Angeles. Unlike the McConahay and Hawley Louisville study or the CPS National Election studies, ours was a local sample obtained some twenty months prior to actual implementation of the L.A. School Board's desegregation plan. Indeed, the L.A.S.B had yet to even submit a proposal to the district judge for review. However, the public debate surrounding the pros and cons of busing were quite fierce during this particular period. For example, citizen action groups, both hostile and favorable to busing, had been formed and were publicizing their views quite extensively. We hypothesize that the resultant uncertainty, coupled with the intense affect characteristics of the busing debate, led to a sharp increase in the special anxieties accompanying the objective self interest characteristics of those respondents with children in school e.g., who will be bused, how long, where, for how many years, etc. As a consequence, the self interest component emerged.

The hypothesis further holds however, that when the uncertainty factor is appreciably decreased as, for example, when the details of the plan are announced, the special anxieties attending objective self interest characteristics will dissipate e.g., who is to be bused will be known. As a result, the self interest component will once again become minimal. Of course, as our data at present is cross-sectional we have been unable to fully test this new and important hypothesis. Said another way, we have been unable, as of yet, to contrast the potency of the self interest composite item after the L.A. School Board's plan had been formally accepted or actually implemented. However, given the trends in the rest of the

literature, it seems not unreasonable to expect such a decrease in self interest once the uncertainty factor is reduced.

In sum, our data once again documented the symbolic politics phenomenon. The symbolic political attitudes, in our case generalized radical intolerance and political conservatism, continued to exert considerably more influence on the policy attitude dependent variable than did the relevant current, more self interested variables (see Sears et al, 1977; McConahay et al, 1977; Kinder and Kieweit, 1977; and Tyler et al, 1977 for related analyses). Moreover, the overwhelming impact of the symbolic attitudes persisted even when the subjective perceptions concerning the likelihood of future in-busing and future out-busing was controlled for. Unique in our data, though, was the finding that a modest self interest effect emerged. This result is the first of its kind in the related data and is attributed to the fact that we interviewed respondents prior to the actual formal announcement of the desegregration plan, but in a period of generalized high threat and uncertainty due to the prospects of the implementation of such a plan.

Thus our data emphatically call the purely utilitarian explanation, which in essence seems to be the conventional wisdom concerning why whites in Los Angeles are against busing, into question. Quite simply, the symbolic political attitudes appear to form a more substantive and durable contribution to white opposition than self interest. On the other hand, our data also suggest that formal allowance needs to be made in the socialization model for the emergence of the self interest factor under certain circumstances. In short, self interest may indeed be operative, but only moderately so in that relatively narrow time from preceeding actual imple-

mentation of busing. Seen in this light, our study constitutes but a beginning effort to isolate those conditions in which the self interest effect does obtain. In our view further clarification of this issue is of the utmost importance, both for purposes of public policy as to the most advantageous procedures for implementing busing, as well as for closure in the functionalist-socialization debate.

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FOOTNOTES

1. L.A. Times, Metro section, June, 1977

Table 1

Predictors of Opposition to Busing for Racial Integration: Regression Equation

	Beta	F	p
Self Interest			
Self Interest Composite	+.173	23.579	.001
Future In-Bus	+.031	.587	n.s.
Future Out-Bus	+.014	.134	n.s.
Symbolic Attitudes			
Generalized Racial Intolerance	+.390	119.500	.0001
Political Conservatism	+.144	17.550	.001
Demographics			
Age	+.044	1.481	n.s.
Education	+.053	2.305	n.s.

Note: Overall F = 30.094, 7/793 df, p .001. The R^2 = .22562. The pairwise deletion procedure was used to maximize the number of respondents in the analysis.

Table 2

Percent Extremely Oppcsed to Busing For Racial Integration as a Function of Symbolic Political Attitudes

	Political Conservatism				
	Liberal	Middle of Road	Conservative	Total	n
Radical Intolerance					
Low	46.6%	56.8%	75.3%	59.6%	245
Medium	74.0%	85.1%	88.1%	83.5%	255
High	86.2%	93.0%	90.3%	89.8%	255
Total	64.0%	78.4%	86.1%		
n	247	I34	374		755

Note: The entry is the percent holding "strongly opposed" opinions on the general busing item at designated combination of intolerance and conservatism.

PROPOSED MODEL OF WHITES' OPPOSITION TO BUSING

Note:

(1) * → denotes negative relationship between constructs and/or variables

(2) the absence of an arrow from self interest to busing opposition in the post-implementation phase

(3) the relative number of pluses denotes the strength of the positive relationship.